

# Writing in the 21st Century

A report from the National Council of Teachers of English

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## A Call to Support 21st Century Writing

Today, in the 21st century, people write as never before—in print and online. We thus face three challenges that are also opportunities: developing *new models of writing*; designing a *new curriculum* supporting those models; and creating *models for teaching* that curriculum.

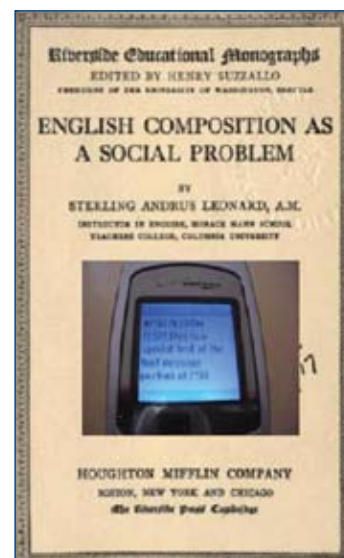
Historically, we humans have experienced an impulse to write; we have found the materials to write; we have endured the labor of composition; we have understood that writing offers new possibility and a unique agency. Historically, we composers pursued this impulse to write *in spite of*—*in spite of* cultures that devalued writing; *in spite of* prohibitions against it when we were female or a person of color; *in spite of* the fact that we—if we were 6 or 7 or 8 or even 9—were told we should read but that we weren't *ready* to compose. *In spite of*.

It's time for us to join the future and support all forms of 21st century literacies, inside school and outside school. For in this time and in this place we want our kids—in our classrooms, yes, and in our families, on our streets and in our neighborhoods, across this wide country and, indeed, around the world—to “grow up in a society that values knowledge and hard work and public spirit over owning stuff and looking cool.” (Garrison Keillor, *A Prairie Home Companion*)

This is a call to action, a call to re-search and articulate new composition, a call to help our students compose often, compose well, and through these composings, *become* the citizen writers of our country, the citizen writers of our world, and the writers of our future.

## Historical Perceptions of Writing: Five Themes of Writing and Writing Instruction in 20th Century America

What we know about writing in the 20th century and before is important to our understanding of writing in the 21st century.



***Writing has never been accorded the cultural respect or the support that reading has enjoyed, in part because through reading, society could control its citizens, whereas through writing, citizens might exercise their own control.***

As Jennifer Monaghan and Wendy Saul explain, Society has focused on children as readers because, historically, it has been much more interested in children as receptors than as producers of the written word.

Only an educated citizenry could be relied upon to preserve the Republic. In pursuing that goal, however, the emphasis was not on creative individuality, but on obedience to the law. Reading and listening were the desired modes. It is by requiring children to read the writings of adults that society has consistently attempted to transmit its values. (90-91)

***Reading—in part because of its central location in family and church life—tended to produce feelings of intimacy and warmth, while writing, by way of contrast, was associated with unpleasantness—with unsatisfying work and episodes of despair—and thus evoked a good deal of ambivalence.***

As Deborah Brandt puts it in her accounts of twentieth century Americans,

Whereas people tend to remember reading for the sensual and emotional pleasure that it gave, they tended to remember writing for the pain or isolation it was meant to assuage. People's descriptions of the settings of childhood and adolescent writing—a hospital bed, the front steps of a house, and . . . a highway overpass—were scenes of exile, hiding, or at least degraded versions of domesticity, in marked contrast to the memories of pil- lowed, well-lit family reading circles. . . . (156)

***In school and out, writing required a good deal of labor.***

We forget how difficult the labor of writing has been historically—the “sheer physical difficulty of inscribing alphabetic characters on some sort of surface” (Murphy 5), especially for children; how pencils weren’t widely available until the early part of the twentieth century, which was forty years before the invention of the ballpoint pen; how messy and sloppy it was to try to compose in ink that dripped all over the page—and then smudged. The labor of composing was such, in fact, that for a few years in the late 1920s manual typewriters—and we know how hard it is to pound those keys on the page—actually seemed a viable alternative to pencil or pen for children in elementary school. In fact,



it may be that what George Hillocks has called our over-attention to form in composition instruction began in our attention to the form of handwriting, because in the early part of the century, much instruction in writing was no more than instruction in penmanship. Much as in the case of grammar today—when grammar is identified as writing (Yancey)—writing itself in the early twentieth century had little if any status or identity apart from handwriting.

***Writing has historically and inextricably been linked to testing.***

In 1945, Horace Mann advocated that teachers should test students not in speech but on paper, in part to serve the interest of fairness (Odell 4-5). It was his observation that teachers’ evaluations of students’ oral presentations were uneven and thus unfair. Tests of writing, which could be reviewed more consistently, provided a remedy for this problem, but this remedy also helped initiate a narrative about writing-as-testing that continues to haunt us today (Odell 4). As important, this narrative was reiterated on the college level with the advent of the Harvard exams, in which writing was identified in two ways: with testing and with so-called basic skills, as Mark Richardson explains:

In 1874, responding to an influx of new students [of widely varied social classes and levels of literacy, Harvard] administered an entrance exam in [writing]. . . . Over half of the applicants who took it failed.

Colleges responded by creating composition courses. Harvard’s new writing courses were not taught by a rhetorician or an English teacher, but by a newspaperman, Adams Sherman Hill. None of the other instructors of Harvard’s composition courses had advanced degrees, either. In other words, “composition” was not a strategically planned curricular development, nor did it evolve out of scholarship or pedagogical expertise.

It was invented in a hurry to resolve a perceived crisis. . . . And as Harvard went, so went the rest of American higher education. (pars. 4-5)

***Without a research base or a planned curriculum—which were the central components of reading and, likewise, the central components of all disciplines—composition tended to take on the colors of the time, primarily (1) its identification as a rudimentary skill and (2) its predominant role in the testing of students.***

And still, *outside of school, people wrote*—orders from the Sears book; letters from European trenches in World War I; diaries recording the flotsam and jetsam of daily life.

## Historical Perceptions of Writing: Two Trends that Affected Writing and Writing Instruction in 20th Century America

***As the 20th century progressed, writing instruction was influenced by two countervailing trends: science and progressivism.***

At the beginning of the 20th century, the influence of *science* permeated all of education. On one level, it promised the hope that with a more systematic approach, more students could be helped to learn and the teaching profession might become just that, a profession. As a practical matter, however, especially in the case of writing, what immediately happened was that writing became a phenomenon to be measured, and it began with the most rudimentary aspect of writing, the labor that produced it: handwriting, which was assessed by quantitative handwriting scales. The fascination with such scales soon expanded to entire texts, as well as with other testing technologies and continued until the 1940s, which is about the time that testing shifted to multiple choice measures, a shift making rating scales for essays obsolete.

But at the same time, in part because of the influence of the 1935 NCTE-developed Experience Curriculum in English, teachers from elementary schools through college had a more *progressive* view of all language arts, including composition, as expressed in a curriculum centered on the child. Indeed the focus on each unique child was a



first principle. Noting that “experiences in the use of language” are “always social contacts,” a curriculum much like today’s writer’s workshop was proposed, with six classroom procedures—including identifying an occasion to write, “providing assistance to writers as they write,” and helping students understand that success is dependent “on the effect of their efforts on the audience” (Hatfield 136). It was a curriculum rich in everyday genres: letters, recipes, diaries, reports, reviews, summaries, and new stories.

At the same time, the dearth of theory or research that characterized the beginnings of composition persisted, resulting in what I have come to think of as composition-as-windowpane. That is, writing became a vehicle for any interest one had in mind and was not used as a knowledge-making activity or understood as a cultural artifact, a process, or an object of study. Reviewing the titles of articles in *English Journal (EJ)* during the 1930s and ‘40s, we see both the influence of science and the absence of theory. Some almost-random samples: in 1930 it’s a liberating activity; in 1932, a bookmaking activity and an activity in art; from 1933 to 1934, we have three articles on experiments in composition; in 1934, a criticism of life; from 1935 to 1938, we have, first, composition as adventure, and then, composition as travel; in 1946, the basis for a shared contemporary experience; and in 1934, my personal favorite: “Teaching Behavior and Personality through Composition.”



And still, *outside of school, people composed*—through the support of the Works Progress Administration; from Prisoner of War camps; inside religious books to annotate their night-time reading.

## Historical Perceptions of Writing: Study and Teaching of the Writing Process

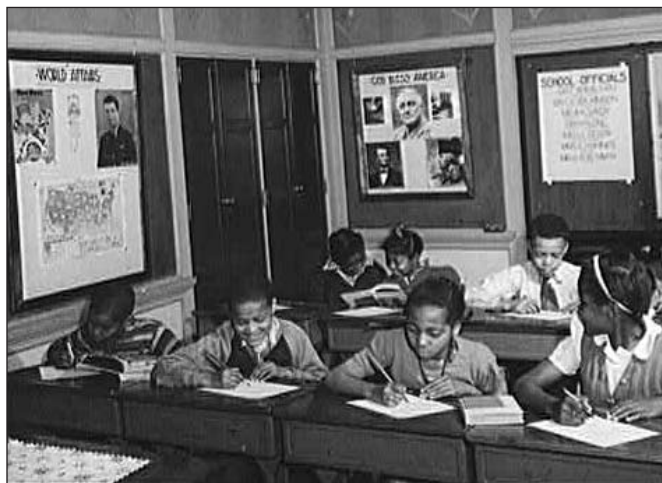
***In the 1960s and 1970s and 1980s, we saw a new conception of writing emerge, one that came to be called process writing.***

Process writing was informed by nascent research and enthusiastically adopted by many teachers in classrooms large and small and throughout the curriculum. Some scholars studied the writing processes of famous authors, while others—Janet Emig and Sondra Perl, Lucy Calkins and Nancie Atwell, Donald Graves and Mina Shaughnessy—learned from students how composing works. These studies and others like them provided a new curriculum for composing located in new practices: invention, drafting, peer review, reflection, revising and re-writing, and publishing. And this new work in composing, in part because it was language-based, supported other scholarly and pedagogical advances of the time. Such an advance is captured in CCCC/NCTE's 1974 position statement "Students' Right to Their Own Language," a document authorizing students as legitimate language users in ways not imagined a mere 20 years before nor obvious to the culture at large, even now. During this time we also saw new assessment practices develop from this process-rich model of composing, most influential among them the portfolio.

At the same time, however, the promise of composing process as developing theory and classroom practice was truncated by several factors, among them two that are related: (1) the formalization of the process itself, into a narrow model suitable for (2) tests designed by a testing industry that too often substitutes a test of grammar for a test of writing and that supports writing, when it does, as an activity permitted in designated time chunks only, typically no more than 35-minute chunks.

### ***The invention of the personal computer transforms writing.***

But at the same time that writing process was, on the one hand, being theorized, researched, and used to help students write and, on the other hand, being undermined, an invention that would transform writing, education, and life more generally was created: the personal computer (not the network, but simply the box that is the computer). That box, as Richard Lanham has suggested, makes available means of expression beyond pencil, beyond pen, beyond earlier imagination. And what that meant for writers was explained early on, in 1988, by



Pat Sullivan when she identified *four changes that computerized composing introduces, all of them beneficial*:

Desktop publishing—[which] refers to a computer system that can be used to produce a finished page . . . —can inspire students to ambitious, creative projects; it can give teachers a means for teaching how visual and verbal elements of a page work together to make meaning; it can give writing classes a new and intensely social application; and it can give students useful skills. (346–7)

Research on this composing—which is basically a new model of composing in its attention to the visual and to audience—is needed. In this model of composing, meaning created through the interaction between visual and verbal resources is central, and also key to composing is the role of audience and the social nature of writing, an aspect of writing process that received attention later rather than earlier during this time, and that, as we will see, has become a central feature in the new models of composing emerging now.

And still, *outside of school, people wrote*: soldiers composed accounts of Korea and Vietnam; Ford, a pardon of Nixon; Martin Luther King, a letter from Birmingham Jail.

## Writing in the 21st Century

**With digital technology and, especially Web 2.0, it seems, writers are *\*everywhere\****—on bulletin boards and in chat rooms and in emails and in text messages and on blogs responding to news reports and, indeed, reporting the news themselves as I-reporters. Such writing is what Deborah Brandt has called self-sponsored writing: a writing that belongs to the writer, not to an institution, with the result that people—students, senior citizens, employees, volunteers, family members, sensible *and* non-sensible people alike—want to compose and do—on the page and on the screen and on the network—to *each other*. Opportu-

nities for composing abound—on MySpace and Facebook and GoogleDocs and multiple blogs and platforms—and on national media sites, where writers upload photos and descriptions, videos and personal accounts, where they are both recipients and creators of our news.

***In much of this new composing, we are writing to share, yes; to encourage dialogue, perhaps; but mostly, I think, to participate.***

In fact, in looking at all this composing, we might say that *one of the biggest changes is the role of audience: writers are everywhere, yes, but so too are audiences*, especially in social networking sites like Facebook, which, according to the *New York Times*, provides a commons for people, not unlike the commons that used to be in small towns and large, and an interesting response to Robert Putnam's discussion of community in *Bowling Alone*.

Putnam claims, based on some impressive data, that in the late twentieth century participation in community groups declined. No doubt that's so, but this is the twenty-first, and participation of many varieties is increasing almost exponentially—whether measured in the number and kinds of Facebook posts, the daily increase in activity on the NCTE Ning social site, the number of students involved in this year's elections, the numbers of blogs and the increase in little magazines, and even in the number of text messages I seem to get from persons, political campaigns, and my own institution.

***Perhaps most important, seen historically this 21st century writing marks the beginning of a new era in literacy, a period we might call the Age of Composition, a period where composers become composers not through direct and formal instruction alone (if at all), but rather through what we might call an extracurricular social co-apprenticeship.***

Scholars of composition (e.g., Beaufort; Ding) have discussed social apprenticeships: opportunities to learn to write authentic texts in informal, collaborative contexts like service learning sites, labs, and studios. In the case of the web, though, writers compose authentic texts in informal digitally networked contexts, but there isn't a hierarchy of expert-apprentice, but rather a peer co-apprenticeship in

which communicative knowledge is freely exchanged. In other words, our impulse to write is now digitized and expanded—or put differently, newly technologized, socialized, and networked.

I want to put a face on this composing with two examples, one individual and one collective.

**The first:** earlier this year, on August 23, Tiffany Monk, a sixteen-year-old who lives in Melbourne, Florida, looked out her window and was alarmed. Tropical Storm Fay had passed through Melbourne, but not before leaving a flood in its wake, and Tiffany saw that something was very wrong in her trailer park.

"There were people trapped in their homes," Monk [explained]. "Water was rising and there was no way out. (There were) people with oxygen tanks and wheelchairs and there was no way out. They needed help." ("Girl Uses Computer," par. 3)

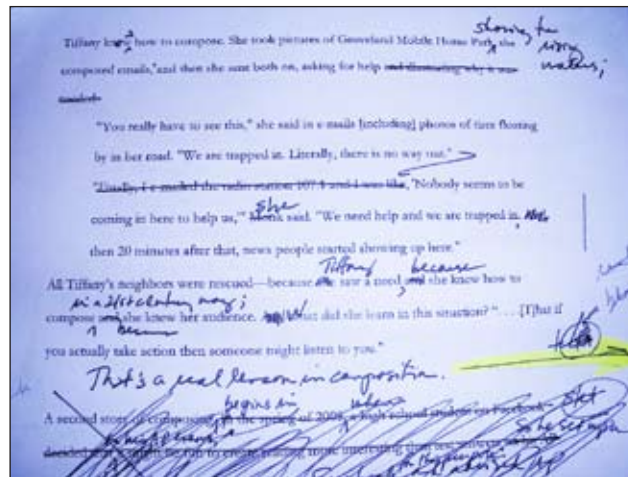
Tiffany knows how to compose. She took pictures of Groveland Mobile Home Park showing the rising waters, she composed emails, and then she sent both on, at the same time asking for help and illustrating why it was needed. "You really have to see this," she said in emails [including] photos of tires floating by in her road. "We are trapped in. Literally, there is no way out." (par. 5)

See this they did: all Tiffany's neighbors were rescued and

many of their personal possessions were salvaged as well—because a sixteen-year-old-girl saw a need; because she knew how to compose in a twenty-first-century way; and because she knew her audience.

And what did she learn in this situation? "...[T]hat if you actually take action then someone might listen to you." That's a real lesson in composition.

**A second story of composing** begins in the spring of 2008, when a high school student on Facebook decides that test-taking could be more fun for him, for other test-takers, and for the test-scorers. And the test? Advanced Placement—AP English, AP history, AP psychology, AP calculus . . . all AP tests. The idea was basically simple: get students to write the "iconic phrase" THIS IS SPARTA from the movie *300*, in capital letters, anywhere on the test, and then cross it out with one line. Because the rules of the test stipulate that students can cross out mistakes and cannot be penalized



for doing so, none of the test-takers could be penalized. In addition, “bonus points” were available if students also wrote THIS IS MADNESS elsewhere on the test.

And write they did.

Facebook users “flocked” to join the group *Everybody Write “THIS IS SPARTA!”*—in fact over 30,000 students. And the readers of these exams enjoyed several laughs, which was the intent. According to Erica Jacobs, who teaches at Oakton High School in Virginia, AP readers participated in the joke in several ways, including exchanging notes with each other about the crossed-out lines, posting a sign proclaiming “THIS IS SPARTA” on a reader table, and beginning the last day by announcing, “This is Sparta!” (par. 9) And what were they laughing at? Two examples from AP history exams:

- As the country slid deeper into the Depression, it became clear that drastic change was needed in order to save the American banking system. Fortunately, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, after taking office, immediately declared “THIS IS MADNESS!” and established a four-day banking holiday.
- After the assassination of Abraham Lincoln, John Wilkes Booth cried, “THIS IS SPARTA” before jumping from the balcony.

Now what’s interesting to me about this event is fourfold.

*One is that these students understand the power of networking, which they used for a collective self-sponsoring activity, in this case a kind of smart-mob action. When you have a cause, you can organize thousands of people on very short notice—and millions when you have more time. Teenagers understand this in ways that many adults do not, and what’s as important, they understand how to make it happen.*

*Two is that the students didn’t stop with Facebook and AP. They went to Wikipedia, where they posted the line THIS IS SPARTA at one point on the entry for the College Board, and THIS IS MADNESS at another point on the same entry. Both those lines stayed on Wikipedia for at least a month, when they were later taken down: contrary to popular belief, Wikipedia is monitored. But these students understand how to contribute to Wikipedia. They understand both the reach and the impact of networking. They understand circulation of messages—from a Facebook group to high school and college teachers to a site that rivals encyclopedias in comprehensiveness and exceeds them in timeliness and that offers opportunities for all of us literally to make knowledge.*

*Three is that the students understood the new audiences of twenty-first century composing—colleagues across the country and faceless AP graders alike. They understood one audience—the testing system—and knew how to play it. Several of the students were concerned enough not to*



want their scores to be negatively affected, as they revealed on another site where college advisors answer questions (answers.yahoo.com)—and those queries were removed, too!—but these students—and there were thousands and thousands of them—were quite simply bored enough to take the chance. Put differently, they refused to write to a teacher-as-examiner exclusively; they wrote as well to live teachers who might be amused at the juxtaposition between a serious claim about John Wilkes Booth and THIS IS SPARTA. Put differently still, they wanted not a testing reader, but a human one.

*Four, we can imagine the ways we might channel this energy for a cause more serious, for a purpose more worthy. In other words, these students know how to compose, and they know how to organize, and they know audience. How can we build on all that knowledge? How can we help them connect it to larger issues?*

***Taken together, what do these observations about new composings mean?***

***First, we have moved beyond a pyramid-like, sequential model of literacy development in which print literacy comes first and digital literacy comes second and networked literacy practices, if they come at all, come third and last.***

And truly, this pyramid has been deconstructing for some time now. It’s the same hierarchy that some want us to use with print composing. When teaching children to write in print, we don’t insist that they spell every word correctly before they are allowed to write a sentence; we don’t expect perfect paragraphs before they are allowed to write a story. We expect complex thinking to develop *alongside* and *with* beginning skills. Complex thinking and skills: they develop together—for the two-year-old learning to talk, for the

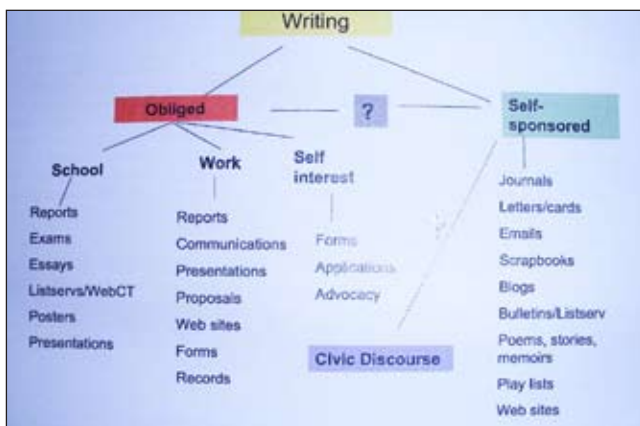
six-year-old learning to write, and for the sixty-year-old still learning to compose—new genres and new media—because perhaps as never before, learning to write is a life-long process. That’s the way we learn to compose digitally, too, of course, in concert with print and alphabetic literacy, not in sequence.

***Second, we have multiple models of composing operating simultaneously, each informed by new publication practices, new materials, and new vocabulary.***

We have many questions about these new composings that we need to pursue, to document, and to share. These are questions we need to take up inside school.

For example:

- Our current model(s) of composing are located largely in print, and it’s a model that culminates in publication. When composers blog as a form of invention or prewriting, rather than as a form of publication (which I did in composing this text: see [kbyancey@wordpress.org](mailto:kbyancey@wordpress.org)), what does that do to our print-based model(s) of composing that universally culminate in publication?
- How do we mark drafts of a text when, as Pam Takayoshi showed twelve years ago, revising takes place *inside* of discrete drafts?
- How and when do we decide to include images and visuals in our compositions, and where might we include these processes in the curriculum?
- How do we define a composing practice that is interlaced and interwoven with email, text-messaging, and web-browsing? As Mark Poster observes, composing at the screen today isn’t composing alone: it’s composing in the company of others. How does that change our model(s) of composing?
- How does access to the vast amount and kinds of resources on the web alter our model(s)?



- Can we retrofit our earlier model(s) of composing, or should we begin anew?

And still, *outside of school, composing is ubiquitous.*

Through writing, we participate—as students, employees, citizens, human beings.

Through writing, we are.

## Conclusion

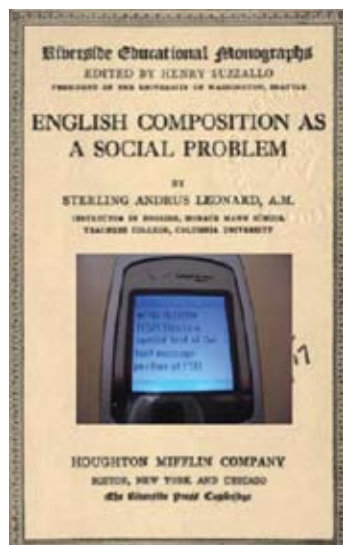
Taken together, what does this brief history and set of observations mean?

We can and should respond to these new composings and new sites of composings with new energy and a new composing agenda. Let me also suggest that an historical perspective like the one I’ve sketched out here helps us understand an increasingly important role for writing: to foster a new kind of citizenship, one that has roots in an earlier time but that is being reimagined today.

**In this context, let me identify three tasks that those of us who care about literacy and who are literacy educators need to take up.**

**One:** *Articulate the new models of composing developing right in front of our eyes.* Through research documenting these new models, we can create the theory that has too often been absent from composition historically, and we can define composition not as a part of a test or its primary vehicle, but *apart from testing*. In creating these new models, we want to include a hitherto neglected dimension: the role of writing for the public. As Doug Hesse has argued, the public is perhaps the most important audience today, and it’s an audience that people have written for throughout history. If this is so, we need to find a place for it both in our models of writing and in our teaching of writing.

**Two:** *Design a new model of a writing curriculum K–graduate school.* In 1995, David Russell suggested that if we wanted writers to compose well, we might consider focusing on writing as an object of study. In 2003, John Trimbur made the same point. He notes that a legacy of the process model is that we think almost exclusively in terms of process, which makes it “difficult to think of writing as a *subject*” [my italics]. “When we say ‘writing,’” he asks, “do we mean its participial form that refers to writing as an unfolding activity of composing or do we designate its noun form to refer to the material manifestations and consequences of writing as it circulates in the world?” (par. 11) This question, in posing *both* answers, points us beyond windowpane composition and beyond an obsessive attention to form and beyond writing as testing; it points us toward creating the fully articulated research base, the theories of composing, and



the planned curriculum that have been missing from composition and its instruction for over a hundred years.

**Three:** *Create new models for teaching.* Here I'm indebted to Matthew Key, an early career teacher in Newark, New Jersey, whose use of communication technologies is changing the instructional model. Two quick examples:

**One:** He "rarely" grade[s] alone. The

students rarely do their homework in isolation. The same chatting software that, when mismanaged, gives us fits in our classrooms, enables us to collaborate in dynamic ways. Students now continue fiery classroom debates when they get home from school. They now walk each other through difficult readings of *The Odyssey* and *Hamlet* and return to class with stronger understandings. Their projects are regularly published—which leads to comments and ongoing conversations with the outside world.

**Two:** He sees research in a twenty-first century world. "It is crucial that [students] learn how to sift thoughtfully through increasing amounts of information. The Internet presents a unique challenge to scholarship—many of the questions that once required extensive research can now be answered with ten-minute visits to Google. The issue now is distinguishing between rich resources and the online collection of surface facts, misinformation, and inexcusable lies that masquerade as the truth. It will be hard for our students to be thoughtful citizens without this ability to discern the useful from the irrelevant. (par. 9)

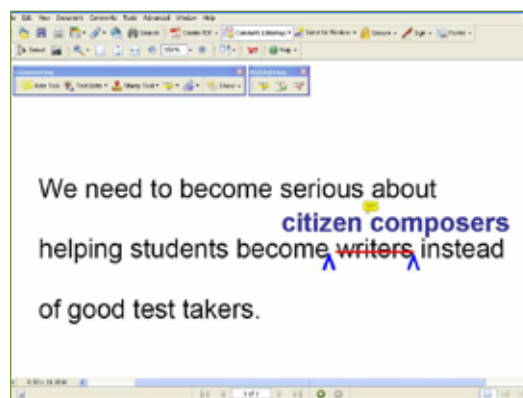
**These are challenges we currently face:**

- **developing new models of composing,**
- **designing a new curriculum supporting those models, and**
- **creating new pedagogies enacting that curriculum**

But these challenges: they are also opportunities—to help students create the texts of their lives as we connect to and carry forward the larger history of composing. Early on in this history, we composed on stone, using plant and animal materials for color; much later, we composed documents creating citizenships; much later still, a West Virginia miner

composed his last hours on whatever paper he could find in order to assure his loved ones that his death was not painful. Historically, like today, we compose on all the available materials. Whether those materials are rocks or computer screens, composing is a material as well as social practice; composing is situated within and informed by specific kinds of materials as well as by its location in community.

We have simply never seen it quite so clearly as we do now.



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